[redacted] UMBRA PROJECT — INTERNAL DOCUMENT [redacted]

FILE CODE: UMBRA–HELLFIRE–PROTO–042

ACCESS LEVEL: TANGO–3

HANDLER ID: [redacted]–[redacted]–BISHOP

NODE: ECHOARCHIVE6

CLASSIFICATION: SIGMA-LEVEL ANOMALOUS INCIDENT REPORT

REVIEW STATUS: UNCONFIRMED // PARTIAL REDACTIONS IN PLACE

TRANSMISSION VERIFIED: YES

ATTACHED MEDIA: NO

THREAT RATING: RED–STATIC–7

// BEGIN FIELD REPORT // DO NOT REPRODUCE //

// OPERATION OVERVIEW //

HELLFIRE PROTOCOL

V-280 Valor – En Route to the Target

2300 hours. Somewhere in the Middle East.

The V-280 Valor cut through the night, its twin tiltrotors humming in near silence. At 300 knots, it was a ghost—faster than any Black Hawk, stealthier than anything in the U.S. arsenal. The airframe's thermal-masking panels bled away residual heat, making it nearly invisible to infrared scans.

Inside the cabin, HAVOC-6 sat in silence, strapped in, visors glowing faint blue from the HUDs (Heads-Up Displays) cycling mission data. They were kitted in full GravWalker Exo-Assault Rigs—carbon-weave musculature augmenting their strength, stabilizing their shots, turning them into predators engineered for modern war.

No one spoke.

Captain Alex Graves checked the mission timer in his visor. Five minutes to drop. He glanced over his team—five men, each lethal in their own way. He didn't need to give a pep talk. They weren't the kind of men who needed reassurance.

He opened comms. "Final checks."

Jason 'Lucky' O'Hara, demolitionist and walking fire hazard, flipped his visor up, revealing a cocky smirk. "Jesus, Cap, we've done this dance so many times I could waltz it in my sleep."

Nobody laughed.

Elias 'Ghost' Alvarez, sniper, didn't look up. He was cradling his CheyTac M200 Intervention XLR, a .408 caliber anti-materiel rifle built for engagements beyond 2,500 meters. Ghost never spoke unless he had to, and that silence carried more weight than anything Lucky could joke about.

"Lucky, shut the fuck up," Marco 'Bishop' Carter, medic, muttered. He was running his hands over his LWRC SMG-45, checking for any last-second imperfections. "I don't need your dumbass jokes when we hit the ground."

Chief Petty Officer Isaac 'Doc' Merritt, their electronic warfare specialist, tapped through RAVEN-9 recon drone feeds in his visor. "No heat signatures, no patrols, nothing outside the compound."

Graves frowned. That didn't make sense. The Shepherd was a warlord, a fanatic whose men fought to the last breath. Intel had painted this as a final stand—kill zones, suicide squads, bunkered defenses. The place should be crawling with Tangos.

But it wasn't.

"They should be watching the skies," Doc continued. "They're not."

Ghost spoke, voice like gravel over comms. "Something's wrong."

Graves didn’t acknowledge it. Just checked his SIG MCX SPEAR, a 6.8mm caseless rifle designed for stopping power at any range. The targeting reticle in his visor pulsed green. Good. He looked up at the ramp.

"We go in," he said. "No survivors."

The ramp dropped. HAVOC-6 deployed.

#

They hit the dirt running.

The compound loomed ahead, a jagged fortress of ancient stone, reinforced with crude metal plating. Symbols—old, predating language itself—were carved into the walls. The air smelled of dust, gun oil, and something else—something rotting.

"Stack up," Graves ordered.

Ghost broke away, taking overwatch. Lucky and Bishop stacked against the main door, demo charges already being placed.

"Charges set," Lucky whispered. "Three, two—"

The explosion ripped the doors from their hinges, concussive force rolling through the courtyard like a thunderclap. HAVOC-6 surged forward, weapons up, muzzle flashes cutting through the dark as the first insurgents engaged.

They fought like zealots, screaming in Arabic, unloading bursts of AK fire that pinged off HAVOC-6’s armor plating.

It didn’t matter.

They were outmatched.

Bishop's SMG-45 spat subsonic rounds, stitching a line through two men before they could reload.

Ghost dropped three more from his perch, .408 caliber rounds punching through flesh and bone like paper. Lucky tore through the ranks, his LSATC light machine gun, loaded with caseless hyper-velocity rounds, ripping bodies apart.

The insurgents crumpled. Dead before they hit the ground.

"Clear!" Graves called.

HAVOC-6 moved deeper into the compound, moving like a machine, flawless, precise. Room by room, target by target, they swept forward, perfect in their violence.

They were winning. Easily.

Too easily.

Doc spoke first. "Where are the bodies?"

Lucky frowned. "What?"

"The guy I dropped by the doorway? Should be right there." Doc pointed. "But he's not."

Lucky turned. The corpse was gone.

"Maybe they're moving their dead," Bishop suggested, but there were no drag marks, no blood trails.

Just empty space where bodies had been.

Graves pushed forward. "Stay focused. Keep moving."

They did.

Another cleared hallway. Another room stacked with dead. They moved on.

Then Ghost's voice cut in. "Movement."

Graves stopped. "Where?"

"Sector C. South corridor. Just saw one of them moving ahead of us. But we cleared that hallway already."

Lucky tightened his grip on his LSAT-C. "They hiding in tunnels?"

Ghost hesitated. "No. He was standing. Armed. Looking at me."

"So what's the issue?" Bishop asked.

Ghost's voice came back low, measured. "It was the same guy."

Silence.

"The same guy?" Doc repeated.

"The same face. The same gear. And he was moving like he knew exactly where I'd be looking."

Lucky's mouth went dry. "That's not possible."

But it was.

Graves took a slow breath. The first crack in the op had formed.

"Keep moving," he ordered. "Stay sharp."

HAVOC-6 pushed forward. More resistance. More kills. More corpses.

But every time they swept back through an area—

The bodies were gone.

// INITIAL CONTACT LOG //

The breach had been clean. Precise. HAVOC-6 moved through the compound with the speed and lethality of a machine, their training turning war into reflex. They were the apex predators in this fight, and the enemy didn't stand a chance.

Lucky set up a firing lane at the breach, his LSAT-C barking suppressed bursts down the open corridor. The light support weapon, chambered in caseless 6.8mm highvelocity rounds, chewed through bodies

like they were made of bubble-wrap. He fired in short, calculated bursts, the gyro-stabilization reducing recoil to near-zero, letting him keep up an uninterrupted wall of fire.

Bishop was beside him, moving fast and precise. His SMG-45 coughed out subsonic rounds, each one punching through Kevlar and bone, turning tight corners and hallways into kill zones. Every step forward was another body dropped. Every sweep of their formation was a textbook example of coordinated violence.

The insurgents weren't trained soldiers. They fired in wild, desperate bursts, their AKs flashing in the dark, tracers ricocheting off the stone walls. But panic made them sloppy. Lucky and Bishop cut them down before they could reposition.

Graves led the formation deeper, scanning the tactical map in his HUD. "Ghost, report."

Ghost's voice came through the comms, steady as always. "Courtyard clear. No movement up top. No sign of secondaries. They're all holed up inside."

"Copy. Hold overwatch." Graves turned to Doc. "Push the drone forward. Sweep the next section."

Doc nodded, fingers tapping commands into his wrist-mounted console. The RAVEN-9 recon drone, an AI-assisted multi-role UAV the size of a dinner plate, hummed to life and skimmed through the next corridor. Its sensors fed directly into their HUDs, giving them a real-time heat map of everything ahead.

"One room, twelve heat signatures," Doc murmured. "All armed. They're waiting for us."

Graves didn't hesitate. "Lucky, prep frags. Bishop, cover the door. We go in hard."

Lucky grinned and pulled two grenades from his vest. "Love it when we keep it simple."

He primed the frags, lobbed them through the doorway, and turned away just as they detonated in a deafening concussive blast. The moment the shockwave passed, Graves was first through the breach, MCX SPEAR at the ready.

#

The war room was chaos—smoke, fire, and the screams of the dying. The remaining insurgents were scrambling for their weapons, blinded by the blast. HAVOC-6 didn't give them the chance.

Ghost fired first, his CheyTac M200 Intervention punching a round through an insurgent's skull, sending a fine red mist against the wall. Graves dropped two more before they could even raise their rifles. Lucky stitched a burst across the room, his caseless rounds hammering bodies into the dirt.

The fight was over in less than ten seconds.

Silence followed.

Bishop exhaled. "That it?"

Doc scanned the bodies. "Clear."

Lucky kicked over a body and spat. "We expected a fortress. We got a goddamn shooting gallery."

Graves wasn't convinced. This was too easy.

He turned toward the far end of the room, where a single bloodied, gasping figure was propped against an overturned desk. The Shepherd.

The warlord's chest was a mess of shrapnel and bullet wounds, blood pooling beneath him. His lips curled in something like a smirk.

Graves walked up and leveled his MCX at the man's forehead.

The Shepherd wheezed, voice thick with blood. "You don't even know what you've done."

Graves pulled the trigger.

The Shepherd slumped. Dead.

Lucky cracked his neck. "So much for a final stand."

Graves didn’t relax. Something was wrong. He could feel it.

"Doc, confirm the kill and mark it for exfil. Everyone else, reload and prep for sweep. We clear the rest of the compound, then we—"

Ghost’s voice cut through the comms.

"Movement."

Graves froze. "Clarify."

"Sector C. South corridor. Just saw one of them moving ahead of us. But we cleared that hallway already."

"You sure?"

Ghost’s voice was steady, but there was something else in it. Something new.

"I know what I saw."

Graves inhaled slowly, forcing the unease back down. The first crack in the op had formed.

"Keep moving," he ordered. "Stay sharp."

// ESCALATION EVENT: TIMESTAMP [[redacted]/[redacted]:[redacted]:[redacted]] //

They left the war room, moving back through the corridors they had already cleared. The halls were eerily quiet, save for the hum of their own systems. They turned a corner—

And found fresh barricades.

Metal sheeting, overturned desks, crates stacked to form cover. None of this had been here when they came through. It was like the enemy had been given time to reestablish defensive positions.

Doc whispered, "That’s not possible."

Lucky’s grip tightened on his weapon. "How the fuck did they set this up so fast?"

Bishop scanned ahead. "Maybe they had a fallback plan? Hidden rooms or something?"

Ghost’s voice crackled in, sharp. "No. We would’ve seen movement. There was no time."

Graves didn’t like it. Someone was ahead of them, reading them, predicting them.

"We’re getting bogged down here," he said. "We need a high-angle overwatch."

Lucky grinned. "On it."

He took off at a dead sprint, exo-rig humming as it kicked into high gear. His boots barely touched the ground as he leaped onto a crate, vaulted off the stacked metal barriers, and drove his weight upward in a gravity-defying leap.

He cleared the rooftop in a single bound, landed in a crouch, and immediately laid down suppressing fire.

"Tango left side, suppressed!" he called, mowing down two hostiles that had been setting up another ambush point. "This is way too coordinated, Cap!"

Graves knew it too. The longer they stayed, the less sense the fight was making.

Something was off.

Something was wrong.

And they hadn’t even begun to realize how deep it went.

T he barricades weren’t there before. That was fact. Graves trusted his memory, trusted his team, trusted the drone footage they had cleared minutes ago. And yet,

here they were—fresh obstacles, hastily erected, but well-placed for cover and defense.

Bishop adjusted his grip on his weapon. "They’re fast. Too fast."

"No way they had time for this," Doc muttered. "We're talking seconds. Maybe a minute. They didn't just pull this out of thin air."

"Then explain it," Bishop said.

No one had an answer. The radio was still clear, no reports of enemy reinforcements. No chatter that made sense.

Ghost's voice crackled in over comms. "Movement. North corridor, just past the last cleared sector. Same pattern."

"Same pattern?" Graves asked.

Ghost hesitated. "Same enemy. Same gear. Same exact movements. They're setting up just like before."

Graves didn't like that. "You saying we're running into clones?"

"I'm saying I watched a guy we killed five minutes ago do the exact same reload, the exact same turn, in the exact same spot. Twice."

Lucky swore under his breath. "That's bullshit. There's gotta be a hidden force we missed. Tunnels. A second wave. Something."

"Or something's playing with us," Bishop murmured.

"Cut the superstition," Graves snapped. "We're soldiers, not ghost hunters. We clear, we push. Lucky, take the rooftop again. Give us a high-angle sweep."

Lucky didn't hesitate. He sprinted forward, hit the barrier, and launched himself up, exo-rig absorbing the impact as he landed atop the low stone structure. He scanned with his optic. "Clear up top. No movement."

Graves gestured for the team to push forward. They moved through the new barricades with caution, weapons ready. The corridors were tight, shadows stretching unnaturally from the dim lighting

overhead. The deeper they moved, the more unsettling it became. The bodies were still missing. No drag marks. No blood trails. Just… gone.

Doc stopped suddenly. "Hold up."

Everyone froze.

"What?" Graves asked.

Doc was staring at a corner where the wall met the floor. His voice was low, uncertain. "I swear to god, there was a body here when we came through the first time. I saw it drop."

Graves felt something cold settle in his stomach. He opened comms. "Ghost, confirm backtrack security. Are we clean?"

Static.

Ghost's voice came back a second later, rougher. "Repeat that."

"I said confirm security behind us. Do we have movement?"

Another pause. Longer this time. Then—"I don't see anything. But… I don't think we're clean."

That was all Graves needed to hear. "We're pulling back. Now. Regroup at breach point. Lucky, cover fire."

Lucky barely got into position before the shooting started.

#

The gunfire came from everywhere at once.

Lucky barely had time to throw himself flat against the rooftop before rounds punched through the air where he'd been standing. His exo-rig compensated instantly, stabilizing his fall, but the sheer volume of incoming fire was staggering. It wasn't like before—this wasn't desperate, uncoordinated zealots unloading in a panic. This was tactical. Precise.

"Contact front and flanks!" Lucky shouted, his voice tight over comms. "These fuckers just switched gears!"

Below, Graves dropped into cover behind a low stone wall as rounds chipped at his position. He tapped his visor, switching to thermal overlay—his stomach clenched at what he saw.

Dozens of heat signatures. Moving fast. Too fast. Their enemy was flanking them on both sides with near-perfect execution, cutting off escape routes before HAVOC-6 could react.

"Bishop, smoke out the left corridor! Doc, get the drone back in the air!" Graves barked. He snapped his rifle up and took two quick shots, dropping a figure that barely had time to react. But even as the insurgent fell, another shape moved into the exact same position. Same stance. Same weapon. Same goddamn movement.

His breath caught. His mind screamed at him to ignore it, to focus on surviving the fight, but the wrongness dug in like a parasite.

Lucky laid down suppressing fire from above, sweeping his LSAT-C across the advancing figures, but they weren't breaking formation. They weren't hesitating. "Cap, this isn't normal! They're moving like they know exactly what we're doing before we do it," Ghost finished over comms. His voice was eerily steady. "This isn't an ambush. It's a fucking replay."

#

A round smacked into Graves' shoulder plate, knocking him back a step, but the exorig absorbed most of the impact. He gritted his teeth and scanned for a way out. They were boxed in. The only way forward was through.

"Breach that corridor! Push through!" Graves roared. "Lucky, jump point—rooftop to the next building, cover our exit!"

Lucky didn't hesitate. He sprinted, exo-rig whirring as it absorbed the force of his movements, and launched himself off the rooftop. His boots hit stone on the far side, barely stabilizing before he spun and opened up, cutting down two advancing figures below.

Bishop lobbed a smoke grenade into the left passageway, the thick white fog billowing out and obscuring the enemy's line of sight. "We move now!"

Ghost fired once, twice, every shot hitting clean, but something gnawed at him as he saw the same bodies dropping in the same places. The pieces weren't fitting.

Doc's voice was sharp. "Drone's back up. Scanning heat signatures—" He stopped. "—What the fuck?"

Graves didn't have time for cryptic. "Report."

Doc's breathing was shallow. "There's no new bodies. We've dropped at least fifteen in the last thirty seconds, but the numbers haven't changed. It's the same count as before the fight started."

Graves' blood went cold.

"Move!" he ordered. "Now!"

#

They ran. Not in panic, not in retreat, but in a controlled, tactical withdrawal—except Graves knew this wasn't how it was supposed to go. HAVOC-6 didn't withdraw. They eliminated threats and moved on.

"Keep pushing!" Graves barked. "Lucky, overwatch! Doc, where's our exfil path?"

Doc's voice was strained. "Working on it. Drone's feeding static again. We might be jammed."

"Might be?" Lucky snapped from the rooftop, spraying a burst to keep the advancing figures at bay. "We're being corralled, Cap! This is some next-level battlefield chess shit!"

Ghost fired, dropping another hostile. "Then we flip the board."

"Moving right!" Bishop called, sliding into cover near a collapsed archway. He peeked out, scanning the shadows. "Looks clear!"

He was wrong.

The shot came from the darkness beyond the smoke. A sharp crack—suppressed, close range. Bishop staggered, blinking in surprise as a deep, wet crimson spread across his vest. He fell back against the wall, hands clutching at his ribs.

"Bishop's hit!" Doc was already moving, sprinting to his side. "Hold still—fuck, I need a better angle."

"Contact rear!" Lucky roared. A shape moved in the smoke, too fast, too fluid. He opened fire, but the target blurred, ducking the rounds like it knew they were coming.

Graves swore. "We're compromised! Hold the corridor!"

Doc ripped Bishop's vest open. "Through and through. Right lung's collapsing—he needs evac now."

"Not happening," Ghost said flatly. "We don't even have a clear way out."

Bishop coughed, blood flecking his lips. "They knew. They fucking knew where I'd be."

Graves reloaded, jaw clenched. "Stay with us, Bishop. We're getting out."

Doc slapped a seal over the wound. "I can keep him stable, but he's not walking out of here on his own."

The enemy wasn't pressing as hard anymore. That was worse. They weren't just attacking—they were watching. Waiting.

#

Lucky's voice came over comms, quieter now. "Cap… what if we're not fighting an army? What if we're fighting the same guys? Over and over?"

Graves didn't answer. He couldn't.

"New plan," he said instead. "We're not running anymore. We're taking control."

Ghost exhaled. "How?"

Graves pulled a cylindrical charge from his belt and armed it.

"We level the fucking playing field."

#

The charge blinked in Graves' hand, a small pulsing red light in the dark. A controlled demolition charge—meant for breaching, not leveling structures, but enough to turn their immediate surroundings into a kill zone.

"On my mark," Graves said, voice low. "We turn this into our ground. No more running."

Ghost was already setting up, finding his angles. Lucky dropped from his rooftop perch, landing in a crouch, LSAT-C raised and ready. Doc kept his hands on Bishop's chest, keeping pressure on the wound, his free hand gripping his sidearm.

The enemy was still in the smoke, shifting shapes in the dim light, moving just out of clear sight. They weren't pressing yet, but Graves could feel it coming.

"They're waiting for something," Lucky muttered. "Like they're giving us time to figure out how screwed we are."

Graves exhaled. "We're not screwed. We're still in control."

"With all due respect, Cap," Doc cut in, "Bishop's bleeding out and we don't have a clear way out. Define 'control.'"

"We force them into a funnel," Graves said. "Make them come to us, lock them down, and eliminate them. If we can't find a pattern, we break it."

Ghost adjusted his grip on the CheyTac. "If they let us."

There was no time for doubt. Graves armed the charge and lobbed it down the corridor. It landed with a metallic thunk, blinking faster.

"Brace!" Graves barked.

The explosion ripped through the narrow passageway, concrete and metal shearing apart, sending a shockwave through the compound. Smoke and dust billowed out, momentarily obscuring everything.

Then they came.

The first enemy emerged from the debris, sprinting through the dust cloud with unnatural speed.

Graves put a round center mass—dead before it hit the ground.

Another one, same movement, same sprint—Ghost's rifle cracked, a .408 round blowing half its skull off.

Then another. And another. Each one moving the same way, taking the same angles.

Lucky swore and opened up with the LSAT-C, suppressive fire tearing through the corridor. "This is wrong. This is so fucking wrong!"

Bishop coughed, barely lifting his sidearm. "We knew that already."

Graves kept firing. Kept watching. But the bodies weren't piling up the way they should. Some were missing. Some were in different places.

"This isn't working," Ghost muttered. "We're not stopping them."

Graves gritted his teeth. The pattern wasn't breaking.

They had to change the game.

"Fall back to the secondary position!" he ordered. "We cut deeper, make them overcommit!"

Ghost hesitated for half a second before nodding. "Copy. Moving."

Doc hoisted Bishop, dragging him back. Lucky laid down cover fire as the squad peeled away, deeper into the compound.

But the enemy didn’t hesitate.

They just kept coming.

#

The fallback wasn’t pretty, but it was controlled. HAVOC-6 was used to adjusting under fire, used to reading an enemy’s tactics and shifting their own. The problem was, they still didn’t understand what they were fighting.

They had cleared this space before. Now it was filled with moving shapes, the same shadows, the same fighters taking the same angles like they had rehearsed it a thousand times.

"This isn’t a counterattack," Ghost said over comms. "It’s a fucking rerun."

Graves didn’t have time to process that. "We break the loop. Bigger rounds."

Ghost slung his rifle off his back and yanked a fresh magazine from his belt, the casing glinting faintly in the dark, a band of gold-colored tape wrapped around the bottom. "Helios rounds. Let’s see what these bastards think of plasma injection."

Lucky let out a breath. "Love me some war crimes."

"Not a war crime if it works," Doc muttered. "Just another Tuesday."

Ghost took a knee, bracing his rifle against a cracked stone barrier, found his target through the smoke —center mass, dead on. He fired.

The Helios round hit, and for a split second, nothing happened.

Then the target ignited.

The figure seized mid-step, spasmed, and then collapsed as molten plasma tore through its structure.

The light burned too bright for a moment, then it was gone— leaving only something brittle, cracked, and wrong.

Silence. Then—

The enemy hesitated.

They stopped moving in sync. Their approach broke. One of them took a half-step back.

"Holy shit," Lucky whispered. "We can kill them."

Graves reloaded. "Then we do."

Ghost fired again. Another enemy erased in a burst of white-hot light.

The squad pushed forward.

Lucky laid down fire from the hip, his exo-rig compensating, stabilizing, his LSAT-C cutting through bodies with ruthless efficiency. Bishop, pale and wounded, still managed to lift his sidearm and fire, each shot dropping targets that actually stayed down.

The momentum was shifting. For the first time, HAVOC-6 wasn't retreating—they were winning.

Ghost took another shot. Another kill. "They're breaking."

Doc's voice came through, breathless, disbelieving. "I think we can actually get out of this."

Graves didn't let himself feel it, but it was there—the smallest flicker of hope.

Lucky, though, grinned through the madness. "Told you motherfuckers, I'm too pretty to die—"

Then The Shepherd stepped forward.

Lucky turned his rifle toward him, grinning wild and half-mad. "Hey, asshole, how about you—"

He fired.

The round hit.

The Shepherd staggered.

Then he didn’t fall.

The smile faded from Lucky’s face. "Oh. Oh, no."

Ghost adjusted, firing another round, dead center. The plasma burned, flared, started to spread—

Then it stopped. The glow faded. The Shepherd straightened.

The others stopped burning.

"No," Doc breathed. "That’s not—"

The Shepherd took another step forward, that same grin on his face.

Graves felt the hope die in his chest. "They adapted."

The battlefield was silent for a long, terrible second.

Then the enemy started moving again.

Faster.

Ghost’s voice was cold. "New plan, Cap."

Graves’ hands clenched. There was only one plan left.

"We burn it all."

#

Graves ripped the last charge from his vest and primed it. Lucky and Ghost covered him, laying down fire as the enemy closed in, shadows moving faster than humanly possible. Bishop was half-conscious, slumped against Doc, blood pooling beneath him. They weren’t getting out. Graves knew that now.

"Doc! Hellfire!" Graves barked.

Doc didn’t argue. He tore the canister from his pack, twisted the valve, and rolled it toward the breach. A hissing mist spread through the air, clinging to the walls, the floor, the enemy. The Shepherd watched from the far end of the corridor, expression unreadable.

Ghost fired first. A Helios round hit the mist.

The world ignited.

Flames roared through the space, burning white-hot, consuming everything. The heat alone was suffocating. The enemy screamed—not in agony, but in fury.

Lucky let out a sharp, wild laugh. "Burn, you bastards! Burn!" And for a moment—it worked.

The creatures withered in the fire, their bodies cracking, collapsing. Then The Shepherd stepped forward.

His flesh burned, blackened—but he didn’t fall. He didn’t even slow. Ghost fired again. Another Helios round. It did nothing. The others stopped burning.

Lucky’s rifle clicked empty. His breath hitched. "Oh, fuck me." Doc was staring in shock. "That’s not possible."

Graves felt it in his gut. The spark of hope they had clung to—it was gone. "They adapted," he muttered. This wasn’t a battle. This was an execution. The Shepherd tilted his head, studying them, that same awful grin stretching across his face. Then he raised a hand, a lone finger outstretched pointing at the squad, sealing their fate.

The enemy charged. HAVOC-6 met them head-on.

#

It didn’t last long.

The first to go was Bishop. He barely made it to his feet before something ripped through his armor, dragging him down. He fired one last, defiant shot before he was gone.

Doc was next. He emptied his last magazine into the enemy, his face twisted in fury, trying to make it matter—but it didn't. The Shepherd stepped forward, reaching out, and Doc simply ceased to exist.

Lucky fought like hell. He leapt onto an overturned barricade, laying down suppressive fire, screaming curses that barely made sense. Then something hit him. Hard. He felt himself lifted, thrown, crashing into stone. His exo-rig absorbed some of it, but not enough. Pain swallowed his vision.

Graves and Ghost fought back-to-back. They had done this a hundred times. They knew how to move as one, how to cover every angle. But this wasn't a fight. This was a slaughter.

Ghost fired one last shot, and then something dragged him into the dark. His rifle kept firing as he was pulled away, until it didn't.

Then it was just Graves.

His rifle was empty. He switched to his sidearm. Then his knife. Then his fists.

Lucky was crawling toward him, vision blurred, one arm limp at his side. He saw Graves turn to him, saw him open his mouth to say something—

Then The Shepherd reached him.

Graves fought like a man who already knew he was dead.

Lucky couldn't reach him. Could only watch as the Shepherd's hand closed around Graves' throat, lifted him like he weighed nothing.

Lucky tried to move. Tried to stand. Too slow. Too broken.

Graves' last words were lost in the sound of the flames. Then he was gone.

Lucky's breath hitched. Pure instinct took over. His fingers scrabbled across the ground, found something cold and metallic—Graves' dog tags. He didn't think. He just took them and ran.

He didn't look back. Couldn't. The Shepherd was still standing there. Watching. Smiling.

The exit was gone. The fire was closing in. There was no way out.

Except—

Rotors. Distant, then closer.

The V-280. Exfil.

0015 hours. Somewhere over the Middle East.

Lucky's legs barely worked. He stumbled through the smoke, through the flames, his lungs burning, his body screaming for him to stop. The sound of the tiltrotor engines above was the only real thing left.

The ramp was down. A crewman was yelling. He didn't hear what they said. Didn't matter. He dove inside.

The world tilted. The ramp sealed shut. The Valor pulled away.

He was alive.

That was a problem.

Lucky lay against the hull, breathing hard, his own blood pooling beneath him. His fingers clenched something in his palm. He looked down.

Graves' dog tags.

He stared at them, chest rising and falling. Tried to breathe. Tried to think. His brain was scrambled static, his muscles locked.

He tried to say something. Tried to crack a joke. Nothing came out. Nothing was left.

His fingers clenched tighter around the tags. The only thing left of HAVOC-6.

Through the window, below, the compound burned. The Hellfire Protocol had turned it to a smoldering ruin, flames still licking hungrily at the edges of the blast radius. It should have been over.

But it wasn't.

Through the smoke, deep in the wreckage, something moved.

It wasn't over.

Lucky just sat there, staring out the window. Silent. Empty.

// DOCUMENT CLOSURE //

FILE: UMBRA–HELLFIRE–PROTO–042

ARCHIVAL NODE: ECHOARCHIVE6

CLEARANCE TIER: TANGO–3

HANDLER: [redacted]–[redacted]–BISHOP

ACCESS RECORD: [redacted]:[redacted]:[redacted] ZULU / [redacted]

SUMMARY:

Subject narrative concludes in disassociation loop consistent with RIFT-EXPOSURE CLASS-B trauma pattern.

Cross-reference suggests overlap with CASEFILES SIGMA-RIFT–01 and MARCH-CYCLE–RASHID–01, but cognitive drift prevents definitive sequencing.

Final paragraphs demonstrate unstable time dilation, linguistic echo, and recursive event bleed.

Possible contamination of field transcript integrity.

Umbra systems flagged this document under Directive POLARIS–ECHO–03 pending review.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS:

• Flag for EchoHazard Containment Protocol – Tier 2

• Restrict access to Level 7 personnel and above

• Transmit partial content to UMBRA linguistic AI CORE: CHRYSALIS for fragmentation mapping

• Insert into EchoArchive6 with non-indexed hash

NOTES:

This document should not exist. No record of "Operation Hellfire" appears in SIGACT logs.

Agent [redacted] confirmed dead prior to transmission timestamp.

Lock replication vector. Discontinue analysis. Do not engage.

>> **FINAL ENTRY:**

ADVANCE. CLEAR. SURVIVE. REPEAT.

// END OF DOCUMENT //

UMBRA–SIGMA–REDACTED–NODE_6_ECHO

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